The background of the entire page is a photograph of the interior of a Gothic church. The view is from the back of the sanctuary, looking down a long, carpeted aisle. On either side of the aisle are rows of dark wooden pews. The church's architecture features high, pointed Gothic arches supported by columns. Light streams in from windows on the left and right, creating a warm, golden glow. At the far end of the aisle, a dark, arched doorway leads to a brighter area, likely the altar.

Christ, Images, and You

The Biblical Prohibition of Images

Ben Stahl

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To my mother,
who catechized me while
my heart was tender.

The Return of Images

“To whom will you liken Me, and make Me equal and compare Me, that we should be alike?”¹ God’s question, originally directed to the house of Jacob and the remnant of Israel, asks the present reader to consider holy things about God. It asks us to consider God in all His glory as LORD, Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. It asks us to consider the King who wears a robe, the train of which fills the temple, above whose throne the seraphim cry one to another, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.”² God asks us to consider Him “who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen.”³ It asks us to consider the one only, living, and true God. It asks us to consider the three persons of the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Isaiah draws our attention to the eternal, divine, Son of God who in the fullness of time took to Himself a true body and a reasonable soul, lived, died, was buried, rose from the dead according to the Scripture, and ascended into Heaven.⁴

Should man-made images of Christ be used in any context? Using the second commandment as the foundation, this pamphlet first answers the question in the negative – God prohibits the use of man-made representations of all or of any of the persons of the Godhead. Using the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod’s report on images, consideration will then be given to modern arguments in favor of man-made images.

¹ Isaiah 46:5.

² Isaiah 6:3

³ 1 Timothy 6:16

⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. See also the Nicene Creed.

An Abbreviated History of Images

What man-made image can be compared to any or all the persons of the Godhead? The confessional Reformed⁵ answer has been consistent through history: “nothing” and “no one.”⁶ Nevertheless, the history of the visible church is replete with examples of image making and the false worship of God through man-made images.

The Israelites had not left Sinai when in Exodus 32:1-8 they made a golden calf calling it, “your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt.” From the time of the judges through the exile, idol worship (1st commandment) was a regular sin among the people.⁷ Also prevalent was the worship of the true God through images or any other way not ordained by God’s Word (second commandment).⁸ At times idolatry and false Yahweh worship were merged into a syncretistic practice.⁹ The New Testament church was surrounded by idol worshippers and no doubt faced the temptation to worship the true God through false images.¹⁰ John had both idolatry and false worship of the true God in mind when He closed His first epistle concerning the Son of God with these words: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols,

⁵ Frances Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology Vol. 2 (New Jersey, USA, P&R Publishing, 1994), p. 62 – 64. While condemning the worship of images, Lutherans have accepted the use of images in worship and are not included in the term “confessional Reformed.”

⁶ Daniel R. Hyde, In Living Color: Images of Christ and the Means of Grace, (United States: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 2009), 69.

⁷ See Numbers 25:1-9 (the Israelites turning to Baal of Peor); Judges 6:25-32 (The Lord told Gideon to destroy the altar of Baal); Judges 17 (The idolatry of Micah); I Kings 11 (Solomon’s turning with Israel to many false gods); I Kings 16:29-34 (Ahab and Jezebel serving Baal); Jeremiah 44 (The worship of the Queen of Heaven); Ezekiel 8 (The worship of Tammus and the sun); Malachi 2:11 (Judah’s intermarriages with idolaters).

⁸ See 1 Kings 12:25-33 (Jeroboam built the golden calves repeating the words of Aaron at Sainai, “Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!” 2 Kings 18:4 (Hezekiah demolished the bronze serpent from Numbers 21 because the Israelites were burning incense to it.)

⁹ Jeremiah 7:8-11; Zephaniah 1:5

¹⁰ Matthew 23:15-26; Acts 15:24-29; 17:16-34; 19:21-34; Romans 1:18-25.

Amen.”¹¹ The apostle implies that neglecting Christ’s deity and or his humanity results in idolatry.

As the early church gave way to the medieval church, the issue of images brought about a controversy between the *iconoclasts* (icon-smashers) and the *iconophiles* (icon-lovers)/ *iconodules* (icon-servers). The conflict gave rise to the Synod of Constantinople in AD 754 where images were rejected.¹² The victory was short lived. The minority position prevailed. By the time of the Reformation, images “of all or of any of the three persons” were legion. The Lord used the Reformation to return the church to worshipping God in Spirit and in Truth without the addition of man-made images and worship.¹³

500 years after the Reformation, images of the second person of the Trinity have found resurgence in Reformed churches and homes. Sunday School materials are often filled with images of Christ and Christians widely accept their use.¹⁴ Movies such as the 2004 film, “The Passion of the Christ,” and TV shows like the 2017 – present, “The Chosen,” have drawn many viewers from among Reformed churches as well as from broadly evangelical churches.

Some reformed denominations are promoting the use of images of Christ in certain circumstances. In 1981 the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES) passed a position report “On

¹¹ J. Calvin, Commentary on 1 John 5, Calvin's Commentary on the Bible, <https://www.studydrive.net/commentaries/eng/cal/1-john-5.html>. 1840-57 “The Apostle not only condemns idolatry, but commands us to beware of all images and idols; by which he intimates, that the worship of God cannot continue uncorrupted and pure whenever men begin to be in love with idols or images.” See also 1 John 1:2, 1 John 5:21.

¹² Hyde, 137.

¹³ R. McGraw, The Misuse of Christian Liberty, (Tabletalk, March, 2024) <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2024/03/the-misuse-of-christian-liberty/>

The history of the Reformers view on images goes beyond the scope of this tract but can be considered in detail in Calos Eire’s, War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin, (New York, USA, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1989).

¹⁴ G. I. Williamson, The Westminster Shorter Catechism (United States of America, P&R Publishing Company, 2003), p.213 “Pictures of Jesus first came in through the pages of the Sunday school materials. Little by little the children became accustomed to them. They grew up with the feeling that these pictures of Jesus were good. Now, these same people – in adult life – are bringing these pictures into the worship services.”

Images of Christ” that gave church-wide encouragement to the use of images of Christ in a variety of contexts outlined below.¹⁵ Christians should desire to see Christ. Yet, we do not see Christ now in the flesh. We see Him by faith rather than by sight. Though images are disposed of time and again, the visible church seems constantly drawn to their allure.

¹⁵ Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, (Presbyterian Church of America Historical Documents, 1981), Retrieved from <https://www.pcahistory.org/rgo/rpces/docsynod/332.html>.

Reasons to Reject Images

1. The First Reason We Should Reject Images: God Requires Pure Worship

Properly understanding the second commandment rules out images of Christ, as well as of the Father and the Spirit. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism summarizes the second commandment, “The second commandment requireth the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in his word.”¹⁶

The first reason we reject the use of images is that God requires pure worship according to his commandments alone. This statement raises questions: What is pure worship? How do images conflict with pure worship?

What is pure worship? In the first commandment God gives instruction concerning the object of men’s worship.¹⁷ Thomas Vincent summarizes the Catechism by giving three duties of this first commandment: to know God; to acknowledge God; to worship and glorify God. The first commandment thus, by implication, forbids: atheism; profaneness; and idolatry.¹⁸ The second commandment is concerned primarily with how (by what means) men must worship the true God. The third commandment requires reverence for the object of worship. The fourth commandment establishes the day God’s people are commanded to worship Him.¹⁹ In the first commandment God proclaims who men are to worship. In the second commandment God proclaims how men are to worship.²⁰ Worshipping a false god breaks the first commandment and is called “idolatry.” Worshipping the true God in a

¹⁶ The Confession of Faith and Catechisms (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2008), 382.

¹⁷ Exodus 20:3, “Thou shalt have no have no other gods before me.”

¹⁸ Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture*, (East Peoria, IL, United States of America, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2021), 147.

¹⁹ Vincent, 145. See also Westminster Shorter / Larger Catechism Questions and Answers on the 10 Commandments.

²⁰ Exodus 20:4-6, “Thou shalt not make... thou shalt not bow down.”

false way breaks the second commandment and is therefore impure or false. Pure worship than is the worship of the true God in the true way.

How can you know the true or pure way of worship? God said, “Thou shalt not make... thou shalt not bow...” The Westminster Larger Catechism notes that where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is required.²¹ While warning us of false worship, instruction is thereby given for pure worship.²² At the heart of impure worship is a man-made approach to the true God. At the heart of pure worship is the God-ordained approach to the true God.

God calls men to worship. The Psalmist said, “Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.”²³ Jesus said, “The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.²⁴ Men do not call themselves to God. God calls men to Himself.

God regulates His worship. The refrain in Exodus culminates in God saying, “Thus did Moses; according to all that the LORD had commanded him, so he did.”²⁵ Pure worship is revealed by God to His people through His Word.²⁶ This doctrine is known as the regulative principal of worship, which describes how God restricts His worship to His commands in Scripture alone.²⁷ Men do not decide how God should be worshipped; God alone tells them how to worship Him.

How do images relate to pure worship? G.I. Williamson taught that God in Scripture commands only that worship which is positively set

²¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.99 Part 4. “Where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded...” See also Deuteronomy 4.

²² Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 50

²³ Psalm 95:6

²⁴ John 4:23-24.

²⁵ Exodus 40:16. See also: Mark 16:15, Matthew 28:18-20, 1 Corinthians 11:24.

²⁶ Deuteronomy 12:32, 46-47; Matthew 28:20. See also Westminster Larger Catechism #108 and Westminster Shorter Catechism #50.

²⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith, 21: 1

Jon D. Payne, In the Splendor of Holiness: Rediscovering the Beauty of Reformed Worship for the 21st Century (USA, Tolle Lege Press, 2008), 15 – 20.

Darryl G. Hart and John R. Muether, With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship, (United States of America, P&R Publishing, 2002), Chapter 5.

forth in the Scriptures and forbids all other forms of worship.²⁸ So God said to Saul through Samuel, “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice...”²⁹ Man-made worship is not God’s desire. Worship faithful to God’s command is God’s desire. There is no command for man-made images of any or of all of the persons of the Godhead and, therefore, God has forbidden them.

2. The Second Reason We Should Reject Images: God Expressly Forbids Them

Not only does the second commandment require worshipping God only in the way commanded by His Word, it also forbids worshipping Him in any other way. The Westminster Shorter Catechism summarizes in this way, “The second commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images or any other way not appointed in His Word.”³⁰

The focus of the second commandment is the proper worship of God. Men may not worship God in ways He has not commanded. Images are the primary example given for false worship of the true God. As the primary example, images are divided into two categories: 1) “Thou shalt not make... any graven images...; 2) Thou shalt not bow down ...to them...”³¹

Most reformed commentators agree on the dual focus of the second commandment. For example, Francis Turretin noted that there are two parts to the question on images: 1) the question of their worship; and 2) the question of their being made ³² John Calvin, Matthew Henry, J. I. Packer, and the Westminster Divines concur.³³ Yet making and worshipping images are still two aspects of a single command, whose

²⁸ Williamson, 206 – 207.

²⁹ 1 Samuel 15:22.

³⁰ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 51

³¹ Exodus 20:4-8

³² Turretin, 51.

³³ John Calvin, Sermons on Deuteronomy 4:15-20, 289-309.

Matthew Henry, Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible, New Modern Edition, Volume 1 (USA, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 2006), 283
J I Packer, Knowing God (United States of America, InterVarsity Press, 1993),45.
Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 110

primary concern is that we should not worship or promote devotion to God by way of images.

Consider the making of images. First, God does not forbid the making of all images in all situations. With Charles Hodge, we deny the second commandment forbids all images.³⁴ God positively commanded certain images such as lampstands, cherubim, etc. within the context of the Old Covenant dispensation. None of these represented God Himself. In the New Covenant dispensation, the only images He gives are the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper and the water of Baptism.³⁵ Yet even these are not images of any or all three persons of the Trinity.

Second, God does forbid making certain images at all times. Man-made images of "all or of any of the three persons" of the Godhead are forbidden at all times.³⁶ God told Israel they saw no form of Him when He spoke to them, and they ought not make any image of Him.³⁷ Deuteronomy 4 is vital since it expounds the second commandment by explaining the language and examples found in the commandment itself. Moreover, images of Yahweh, rather than of false gods, is the exclusive topic of the text. The same teaching continues throughout the Old and New Testaments – God forbids the making or worshipping man-made images of all or any of the three persons at all times.³⁸

Third, God forbids the making and using of all man-made images in the context of worship. God forbids any graven images of the Creator or the creature in the context of worship. In Exodus 32 the people made a golden calf, using it as the centerpiece in a feast to Yahweh. They received the swift wrath of God as a result. The primary issue was not the making of an image of a calf. The primary issue was making the

³⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol III, (USA, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2008), 290.

³⁵ Hyde, Exodus 37, 1 Kings 6:29.

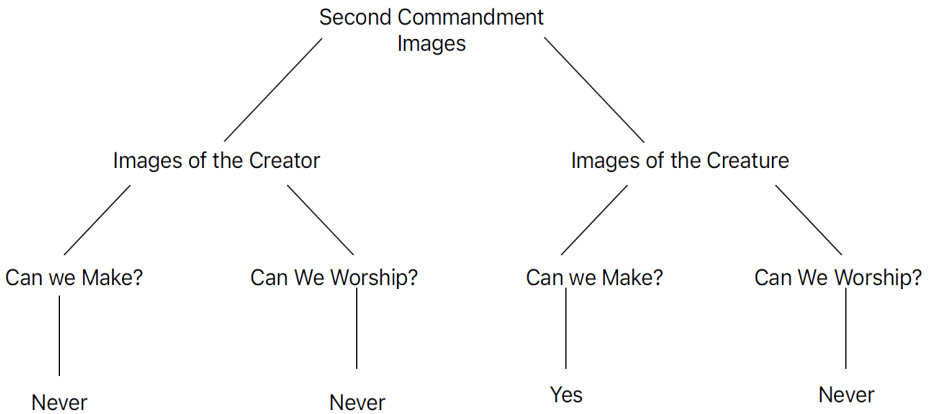
³⁶ Westminster Shorter Catechism #109

³⁷ Deuteronomy 4:15-19.

³⁸ "God, being boundless and invisible, can be represented by no image: 'To whom will ye liken God?' Turretin, p.63. See also Leviticus 26:1; Deuteronomy 5:8-10; Acts 17:27-30.

image of calf to represent Elohim who brought them out of the land of Egypt.³⁹

A diagram helps divide the questions surrounding images.



An objection will be raised based on the ground of Christ's incarnation. Can we not claim that images of the second person of the Trinity are acceptable? We can answer in this way: Christ is a divine person. God forbids making images of Himself. Christ is God. Therefore, God forbids making images of Christ. The second commandment forbids the making any image, of any or all the persons of the Godhead, and the worshipping of God by any graven image. Given the principles above, Christological reasoning from Christ's humanity is not enough to warrant making images of Christ. Daniel Hyde emphasizes from 1 Peter 1:18, "this is the age of not seeing Him."⁴⁰

Worshipping the true God in the true way requires worshipping God only in the way regulated by His Word. Man-made images of all or of any of the three persons are not required, therefore they are forbidden.⁴¹

³⁹ Henry, 320-322. See also Psalm 106:19-20; Isaiah 46:6-7. For additional illustration see the contrast in Numbers 21 and 2 Kings 18:4 with the bronze serpent as a means of escape verses an object of worship.

⁴⁰ Hyde, 60-63.

⁴¹ Westminster Larger Catechism, #109

3. The Third Reason We Should Reject Images: God's Sovereignty, Propriety, and Zeal for His own Worship

After giving the proper way of worship and forbidding sinful ways of worship, God attaches additional reasons for rejecting images. The Shorter Catechism summarizes in this way, "The reasons annexed to the second commandment are God's sovereignty over us, His propriety in us, and the zeal He hath to His own worship."⁴²

The first reason God attaches to the second commandment is His sovereignty over us. He affirms as much in Exodus 20:5, "For I, the LORD...." The LORD is the Mighty King, the Creator of all things both visible and invisible. All things were created through Him and for Him. He holds all things together by the word of His power.⁴³ Because God is who He is, He is free to speak, govern, and ordain as He pleases. God has commanded that we should not make any graven images or bow down to them therefore we must obey Him.

The second reason God attaches to the second commandment is His propriety or ownership over us. He has made us and not we ourselves. As Vincent wrote, "We belong to the Lord; therefore, we ought to keep close to Him and His appointments, and take heed especially of idolatry and superstition, which do alienate the heart from him."⁴⁴ The potter has authority over the clay. God has authority over us; therefore, we must obey Him in all things including worship.

The third reason God attaches to the second commandment is the zeal He has for His own worship. God declared His name, glory, and grace in Exodus 34:6-7. He also declared His zeal and jealousy for His own name, "by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation."⁴⁵ He is just and jealous and will not allow those who worship Him falsely to go unpunished.⁴⁶ God will defend His name. Because of the Lord's zeal for His worship, we must obey Him.

⁴² Westminster Shorter Catechism #52

⁴³ See Isaiah 45:7-9; Lamentations 3:37-39; Colossians 1:16-17; Hebrews 1:3

⁴⁴ Psalm 100:3; Vincent, 151

⁴⁵ Exodus 34:7

⁴⁶ 1 Samuel 15:28, See also the account of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10.

Refuting Arguments in Favor of Images

In 1981 the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES) published a report “On Images of Christ.”⁴⁷ In 1983 the RPCES merged with the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The RPCES report promoted three objections to the Westminster Standards’ teaching concerning the second commandment and images. Answering objections to the Reformed view of prohibiting images of Christ can both clarify and strengthen the biblical reasons for standing behind the prohibitions of the second commandment.

1. The First Argument for Images: Make and Bow Down

The RPCES report said, “The [second] commandment does not prohibit the making of pictures... the commandment does prohibit the making of shaped objects for the purpose of worshipping them or worshipping God through them. Therefore, L.C. 109 is not justified in forbidding any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever.”⁴⁸

While we again affirm that the Lord does not prohibit the making of all pictures or images in all contexts, the premise of the RPCES argument avoids the issue of certain images. It avoids the primary matter, images of God. From a faulty premise comes a faulty conclusion.

The faulty premise assumes one or both of the following: 1) That images of any or all the three persons of the Godhead are equivalent in Scripture to images of God. 2) That images of any or all the three persons of the Godhead only become a violation of the second commandment when they are worshipped. A faulty logic unfolds that separates the humanity and divinity of the one person of Christ.

That all images are equal, Scripture refutes on the grounds of the Creator-creature-distinction. As the Westminster Confession states concerning the covenant, “The distance between God and the creature is

⁴⁷ The full text of this report can be found at <https://www.pcahistory.org/rgo/rpces/docsynod/332.html>.

⁴⁸ RPCES, On Images of Christ

so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part."⁴⁹ If we can only know God through His voluntary condescension, then how can we invent ways of knowing or serving God beyond the ways that God alone has given?

Further, the author of Hebrews wrote, "To which of the angels did He ever say: You are My Son, Today I have begotten You... Your throne, O God, is forever and ever...."⁵⁰ Christ is altogether higher than the angels and cannot be compared to them. How much less any other created thing? Similarly, Christ is the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. By Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth..."⁵¹ "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."⁵² That the Creator is distinct from the creature is irrefutable from Scripture.

We can conclude that making an image of God based on the thoughts of man is to make a lie. The creature is made in the image of God.⁵³ God is not made in the image of man. Packer notes that God "compels us to take our thoughts of God from his own holy Word, and no other source whatsoever... to make an image of God is to take one's thoughts of him from a human source, rather than from God himself; and this is precisely what is wrong with image-making."⁵⁴

Given the deceitful nature of man-made images of Christ, we may conclude that it is idolatry to make representations of Christ in the image of a creature.⁵⁵ Doing so demeans His divine personhood by separating His divinity from His humanity.

⁴⁹ See Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.1

⁵⁰ Hebrews 1:5, 8, 13

⁵¹ Colossians 1:15-16. See also Isaiah 57:15 and 1 Kings 8:27

⁵² 1 Timothy 1:17

⁵³ Genesis 1:27

⁵⁴ Packer, 48-49

⁵⁵ See Hyde, 62 on James Fisher's commentary on the Catechism. See also Romans 1:18-25

That images of God are only sinful when worshipped, is refuted on the grounds of Scripture's teaching concerning the person of Christ. Though Christ came "in the likeness of sinful flesh,"⁵⁶ he remains the eternal divine Son. His humanity remains in union with the Son's person. "The Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continues to be, God and man in two distinct natures and one person, forever."⁵⁷ Therefore, we cannot make images of Christ on the pretense of depicting his humanity without lapsing into Nestorianism, in which we treat Christ as a human as well as a separate divine person.

2. The Second Argument for Images: The Person and Worship Dichotomy

The RPCES report lays out a second objection to the Westminster⁵⁸ view of the second commandment by creating a divide between the person of Christ and the worship of Christ. The report made the following recommendation: "That synod warns against the violation of the Second Commandment (Ex. 20:4-6 and Deut. 5:8-10) by the worship of visual depictions of Jesus Christ, while at the same time recognizing the legitimacy of usual depictions for other purposes, such as instruction or artistic expression."⁵⁹ The report stated further that pictures of Christ are not just permissible but to be encouraged.⁶⁰

The premise of the RPCES argument is that Christians may separate the person of Christ from the worship of Christ. Further, God's people can and should be encouraged to look at man-made depictions of Christ for their help and devotion while not worshipping him through the

⁵⁶ Romans 8:3

⁵⁷ Westminster Shorter Catechism, #21

⁵⁸ See Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 21 and Westminster Larger Catechism #107 - #110.

⁵⁹ RPCES, Recommendation 2

⁶⁰ See RPCES report III. C. The use of pictures of Christ. Recognizing that caution in the making of portraits of Christ is indicated, what are we to say about the use of pictures? While permissible, are pictures of Christ to be encouraged? Yes. For one thing, God's Word itself encourages the picturing of events. The description of Christ entering Jerusalem on "Palm Sunday" is but one of a great number of episodes in the life of our Lord on earth which call forth mental pictures.

image. Like the Lutheran view, the conclusion is that only the worship of the image breaks the second commandment while other uses do not.⁶¹ We reject this argument based on the person of Christ and man's relationship to Him as the object of our faith and worship.

First, the Scripture positively combines the person of Christ with the worship of Christ. That is to say, the Scripture knows of no separation between saving faith in the person of Christ and the worship of Christ. Assuming Joshua met the pre-incarnate Christ when he met the Commander of the army of the LORD, he fell on his face to the earth and worshipped.⁶² When Isaiah saw the LORD sitting on His throne and the angels worshipping, he worshipped.⁶³ When the blind man whom Jesus healed knew that Jesus was Lord, he worshiped Him.⁶⁴ When Jesus entered Jerusalem His disciples worshipped Him.⁶⁵ When He ascended to Heaven, His disciples worshiped Him.⁶⁶ The angels of God see Him and worship Him.⁶⁷ The elders and the host of Heaven see Christ the Lamb and they worship Him.⁶⁸ The testimony of Scripture is that those who believe God worship God. Those that see Christ, worship Christ. Christians think of Christ in the context of worshipping Christ for Christ is both LORD and God and worthy of all worship.

Second, to look at an image of Christ and not worship is vanity. How can a man or woman use an image of Christ for instructional purposes and not worship? The concept introduces a breach in the Biblical view of man's relationship with Christ. Those who do not worship Christ do not believe in Christ. The goal of the Christian life is to know more of God, to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, to worship Him whom we have come to know through His Word.⁶⁹ Thinking only on man's idea of Christ is utterly vain, worthless, and ultimately damning to the soul. If we make images of Christ, we must worship Him through

⁶¹ Turretin, 64

⁶² Joshua 5:13-15

⁶³ Isaiah 6:1-3

⁶⁴ John 9:38

⁶⁵ Luke 19:39-40

⁶⁶ Luke 24:52

⁶⁷ Hebrews 1:6

⁶⁸ Revelation 5:8-14, Revelation 7:9-12

⁶⁹ Philippians 3:10; 2 Peter 3:18

them. Yet if we must not worship him through images, then neither can we make them.

Third, to look at an image of Christ and worship Him through it, is to worship a lie.⁷⁰ Turretin argued that beholding images always leads to worship. Images introduce “holy thoughts concerning God and Christ which cannot but belong to the worship of God.”⁷¹ In other words, the RPCES argument is self-contradictory. If it is vain to look at Christ and not worship Him, then looking at an image of Christ and worshipping is idolatrous. We must not worship lies about Christ, but worship Christ the divine Son of God revealed by God’s Word and Spirit.

When men saw Christ in the flesh they worshiped Him.⁷² When we look at Christ, we must worship Him. Therefore, while we wait to see Him in the flesh, we must not look at false images of Christ but only the true Christ by faith.

3. The Third Argument for Images: Images for Education

The third objection to Westminster’s teaching concerning images of Christ is focused on the instruction of children. The RPCES report stated: “For another thing, pedagogy, particularly with children, calls for depicting events in the life of our Lord - if art has any place in the life of a Christian, should it not find expression in the sphere of that which is of great importance to the believer – the events of Jesus's life and death and resurrection?”⁷³.

⁷⁰ Habakkuk 2:18

⁷¹ Turretin, 64. Whereas Lutherans and many Reformed today following the RPCES guidelines view it as a sin to worship images or through images, Roman Catholicism goes the other direction and considers it anathema not to adore and venerate images (see also Turretin, 52).

John Calvin, Treatise on Relics, (Retrieved From <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/32136/32136-h/32136-h.html>, 1555), p. 218.

⁷² See Matthew 8:1-3; Mark 11:6-10; Luke 17:11-19; John 12:12-13.

⁷³ RPCES, 1981

That the Lord cares for the instruction of children of all ages is positively affirmed throughout Scripture.⁷⁴ Further, Scripture demonstrates the problems that come when children are not raised in the way of the Lord, such as was the case with Eli's two sons. Finally, the Lord gives warning toward those who would mislead children with lies.⁷⁵ Children must be taught the pure truth concerning God from His Word.

God is Truth. The follower of God then must be a lover of truth. Jesus prayed before His crucifixion, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your Word is truth."⁷⁶ Earlier that same evening Jesus told His disciples that He is the way, the truth, and the life.⁷⁷ The writer of Hebrews contends that it is impossible for God to lie.⁷⁸ To love God and His Word is synonymous with loving truth.

The Scripture testifies that images of God are lies. "What profit is the image, that its maker should carve it, the molded image, a teacher of lies, that the maker of its mold should trust in it, to make mute idols?"⁷⁹ With the prophet Habakkuk, Reformed theologians spare few words when referring to man-made images of the second person of the Trinity. Williamson, Packer, Henry, Turretin, and Vincent as a few examples, unite with Romans 1:25 in referring to images of Christ as nothing other than falsehood, lies, and abominations.⁸⁰ Christians are lovers of the

⁷⁴ See Mathew 19:14 "Let the little children come to Me..." and Deuteronomy 6:6-7 "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."

⁷⁵ Matthew 18:6-14

⁷⁶ John 17:17

⁷⁷ John 14:6, See also John 4:24

⁷⁸ Hebrews 6:18

⁷⁹ Habakkuk 2:18, See also Jeremiah 10:8 and Isaiah 40:25-26.

⁸⁰ Williamson, 212-213. "When an artist paints a picture, out of his own imagination entirely and then says, "This is a picture of Jesus Christ," he lies. And the picture is "falsehood, and... the work of errors" (Jeremiah 51:17-18).

Packer, 48. "To follow the imagination of one's heart in the realm of theology is the way to remain ignorant of God, and to become an idol-worshipper – the idol in this case being a false mental image of God, made by one's own speculation and imagination."

Henry, 283. "It is certain that it forbids making any image of God... or the image of any creature for a religious use. It is called the changing of the truth of God into a lie

truth. Man-made images of God are lies. Therefore, Christians must teach their children to lay hold of Christ through faith with the Spirit's blessing rather than through something else.

Imagine a husband asked to produce a picture of his wife. Instead of his actual wife he presents a picture of another woman. The idea is odious. How much more repulsive when the creature treats the Creator in such a manner? The immortal invisible God only wise cannot be truthfully pictured by mortal men. Attempts ought not to be made.⁸¹ The Son of God is "the brightness of His glory and express image of His person."⁸² To lie about a creature is wrong. To lie about God is worse. To spread the lie about God to others is more heinous still.⁸³ Christians must reject false images of God because they are lies. We do not teach lies to our children.⁸⁴

Anticipating an objection the Heidelberg Catechism asks this question: "But may not images be permitted in churches in place of books for the unlearned? No, we should not try to be wiser than God. God wants the Christian community instructed by the living preaching of His Word – not by idols that cannot even talk."⁸⁵ The greatest teacher of God is the Spirit of God working in and through the Word of God.⁸⁶

We want to see children saved. Therefore, we must use the means God gives for their salvation. The Scripture is that which makes

(Rom. 1:25), for an image is a teacher of lies; it insinuates to us that God has a body, whereas he is an infinite Spirit.

Vincent, 145. "Persons are guilty of idolatry in worshipping of God by images – 1. When they worship feigned and false gods (apprehending them to be true) by images and representations.

Turretin, 66. "So far from images being rightly called "books of the common people" and aids to piety and religious devotion, the Holy Spirit testifies that they are teachers of vanity and lies."

⁸¹ Exodus 20:16

⁸² Hebrews 1:3

⁸³ See Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. 51 and 1 Samuel 2:25

⁸⁴ Note the common theme among the arguments: each promotes a lie.

⁸⁵ Trinity Psalter Hymnal, The Heidelberg Catechism, (USA: Trinity Psalter Hymnal Joint Venture, 2018, Heidelberg Catechism), 890.

⁸⁶ Turretin notes, "Sacred signs are the sacraments, not images. The ornaments of churches are the pure preaching of the word, the lawful administration of the sacraments and holiness of discipline." Turretin, 66

one wise unto salvation.⁸⁷ Therefore, we conclude that images of any or of all of the three persons of the Godhead are not true, nor advantageous for conversion, and must be rejected as false. God has not commanded them nor given any promises concerning His blessing upon them. What is false and contrary to the Word of God must not be taught to children. Give them the true Christ! Give them God's Word!⁸⁸

⁸⁷ 2 Timothy 3:15; Luke 16:29-31. See also Peter's successful preaching in Acts 2:41 also Acts 4:4.

⁸⁸ John 8:31-32

Blessed Are Those Who Believe

When Jesus first appeared to the disciples after His resurrection, Thomas was not present. Thomas told his fellow disciples, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails... I will not believe.” Jesus later came to him and said, “Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving but believing.” Thomas responded, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said, “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”⁸⁹

Jesus showed Himself to Thomas not by false man-made images but truthfully in the flesh. Thomas did not separate the person of Christ from the worship of Christ. On seeing Jesus, he fell down and worshipped. The Lord pronounced a startling blessing. The call of the Gospel concerning Jesus Christ the Son is to believe in Jesus Christ alone for salvation who is freely offered, not in man-made images, but in the Spirit working through the means of grace alone.⁹⁰

God has given divine promises attached to the means of grace so that we might know Him. God promises nothing for those who seek Christ by images. When the Christian is asked, “To whom will you liken Me?” He must respond, There is none to whom You can be compared. You are who You are, high and lifted up, and none is like You. Though the Christian has not yet seen Jesus in the flesh, yet he loves Him and rejoices with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of his faith – the salvation of his soul. Until that day we see Christ face to face, may the LORD help His little children to keep themselves from idols, Amen.⁹¹

⁸⁹ John 20:24-29

⁹⁰ Romans 1:1-4

⁹¹ Galatians 4:9, Isaiah 46:9, 1 Peter 1:8-9; 1 John 5:21.

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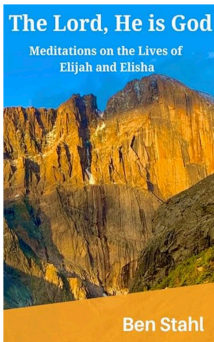
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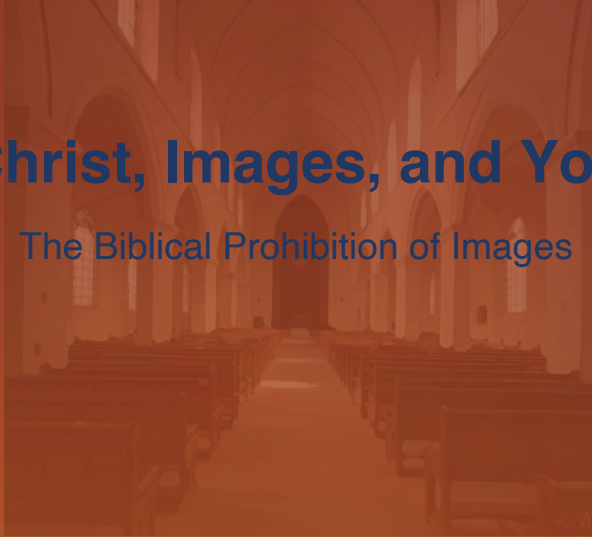


The Day of the Lord



Christ, Images, and You

The Biblical Prohibition of Images



Imagine a husband asked to produce a picture of his wife. Instead of his actual wife he presents a picture of another woman. The idea is odious. How much more repulsive when the creature treats the Creator in such a manner? Nevertheless, how many are content to treat the LORD Jesus Christ in such a fashion? The Son of God is “the brightness of His glory and express image of His person.” To whom will we liken Him? One day we will see Christ face to face. Until then God has given us His Word and Spirit to make us wise unto salvation.

This booklet lays out the Biblical case against images of all or of any of the persons of the Trinity. It also refutes modern arguments in favor of images. May the Lord use it to keep His people fixed on the true Christ and far away from foolish idols.

“Oh, that My people would listen to Me, That Israel would walk in My ways! He would have fed them also with the finest of wheat; And with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you.”

